The Importance of Being

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The Importance of Being

by LittleUggie

Summary

Of all the Beings that revealed themselves to humanity following the first World War, dragons are still the most feared and awed. And why not? They are powerful and mysterious, hoarding treasure and performing magic.

For their part, dragons seem quietly amused by public opinion and do little to discourage it. They adapted to the changing world with aplomb, taking on new, more approachable forms. But that doesn't mean they aren't still dragons.

Notes

Set in the same universe as R Cooper's Beings in Love series, with a few tweaks to the mythos of some of the mythical creatures mentioned.

Chapter 1

Will Graham, former homicide detective, current Quantico professor, lifelong skinwalker, was currently standing in the office of Jack Crawford, head of the Magical Analysis Department at the FBI. (The unofficial slogan, to no one's surprise, "We're all M.A.D. here.)

He examines the photos of eight missing girls. "So evidence has turned up that a Being's taking them?"

It's why Agent Crawford came to him, Will is the resident expert on Beings and their historic and present behavioral patterns. He is, in fact, one of the few Beings working for the FBI, and they couldn't bring themselves to give him full agent status. He had to work tooth and nail (though not literally, that was part of the issue) to get hired by the New Orlean's police department and they took the first opportunity to toss him out that they could. Apparently Beings rights hadn't progressed as much as politicians like to tout. Not in Will's experience anyway.

Jack points at the picture of the latest missing girl. "Elise Nichols. The only one of the girls to be found."

"Dead." It was a statement, it would have been announced if she was found alive. Jack nods grimly.

"Tucked into her bed. With antler velvet in her wounds."

Will's eyebrows raise at that. That's different. "Reminiscent of an old fairy legend."

"That's why we need your help."

Will frowns at the pictures. He doesn't really want to get involved, but…

"Can I see the body?"

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The forensic team already has the girl out on a slab for examination. Zeller and Price try to hide their staring when Jack introduces him, but Katz looks at him with unabashed curiosity.

"You wrote the standard monograph for identifying werewolf attacks." She says, snapping on a pair of gloves.

He shrugs awkwardly. There is something about her scent. "A better one has come out of OSU's Being's Studies department."

She tilts her head, gaze intent on his face, he doesn't look at her her eyes out of habit. Eye contact was somewhat controversial in the Being community, with different significance

placed on it by different entities. He found the best option was to avoid everyone's. He was more comfortable with that anyway. He nods to the body.

"What have you found?"

The forensic team fills him in on the cause of death (strangulation) and the evidence so far found.

"The velvet in the wounds?"

"Not consistent with an animal attack. Deer and elk pin their prey, put all their weight on the antlers and try to suffocate them."

"Antler velvet is rich in nutrients. It actually promotes healing. He may have put it there on purpose."

"Someone tried to heal her? There wasn't any other signs of overt magic."

"She was already dead. Awful hard to bring back the dead, but he was trying to undo as much as he could, given he already killed her."

"He put her back where he found her." Jack's brow is furrowed in thought.

Will nodded absently, staring at the wounds in the girl's abdomen. Deer. There was something there. Deer were interesting animals. Not one of his preferred forms, but he'd been one a few times. Nice for running. Of prey animals, they were one of the better ones to be since they weren't without defenses.

Prey. He tugs on that line. Antlers.

"She was mounted on them. Like hooks. She may have been bled." He says allowed. The others glance at him, startled at the backtrack.

"Could be." Price conceded. Zeller is distracted by his investigation of her abdominal wound.

"Her liver was removed. He took it out and put it back in. See?"

Price and Katz look over the incision.

"Why cut out her liver if he was just going to sew it back in again?" Price asks

Ah. There it was. Will reels in the thought. "Something was wrong with the meat."

He looks into their horrified faces. He thinks he sees a flash of fear in Price's.

"She has liver cancer." Zeller says.

Will closes his eyes. Prey. Hunter. "He's eating them."

Jack's next words cause him to open them again. "So we're looking for something that eats humans."

“Well, we are looking for someone that is eating humans. The crimes are too neat to be done by anything non sentient.”

“So unlikely a fairy then.”

“Not something they are traditionally known for, no. They don’t usually eat any meat.”

“So what are our options?”

Will sighs heavily. “Ghoul, though I wouldn’t think liver cancer would put one of them off. Also they’re more of scavengers. Wendigo, possibly. Though they aren’t usually as discriminating. Whoever this is, they definitely have a type.” He considers. “Could be a lamia. They’ve a history of consuming young women.”

Something about that didn’t feel right, though. Not with this...apology. He looks at Jack. “Honestly, the most likely option is a human. Maybe they’re meddling in dark magic, or…” He leaves that hanging. Because it’s not something most human want to hear, that their species is just as capable of being monsters as Beings.

But Jack just nods. He’s been in law enforcement long enough to learn this lesson. “We’re following every possible lead.”

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Will goes home that night feeling wrung out. It’s dark, far later than he usually gets home. He is trying hard to put the image of Elise Nichols, pale on a metal slab out of his mind. He’s distracted by the sight of a dirty dog trotting along the side of the empty road. He rolls down his window.

“Hello.” He pulls over. The dog shies off into the underbrush.

He sighs. Unlike some Beings, animals have no problems skinwalkers. No more than they have with any other creature. Despite the old legends the name derives from, skinwalkers abilities aren’t the result of dark magic. As far as Will has been able to discover, the power comes from a combination of natural and psychic energies. He’d never met his mother who’d passed on the trait to him, and had only met a handful of others who claimed the title. Of course, there were many different Beings with shapeshifting abilities, but few with his specific skills.

Skinwalkers were limited to the animal kingdom in the shapes they could take. They have to have seen the animal in the flesh (of the few others he had met, all but one other actually had to touch the animal, he had not had to do that since he was very young).

With a glance up and down the deserted road, he gets out of the car and quickly strips. The night air raises goosebumps on his exposed form, but he ignores it, shuffling through his mental closet of skins.

He likes canine forms, spending more time in them than almost any other (even his own some days). He settles on a Labrador mix, nothing to intimidating for approaching the

midsize dog. The change is near instantaneous, nothing like the laborious transformation of a were. It really is like slipping on a coat.

He raises his furred head and sniffs, the scents of the night bringing him all sorts of tidbits of information. It's easy enough to find the other dog, he is watching him warily from under the bushes. Will lies down a little ways from him and wags his tail. Much of canine communication is done through body language.

Friend , he yips. The dog creeps out slowly, ears set back and posture low, but he is unaggressive and gives a slight wag in return.

He tilts his head, *You person?*

Will's impressed. Not many animals were intelligent enough to recognize a shapechanger. Dogs that had been with him for years were still surprised when he suddenly became a different animal.

He thumps his tail in agreement and inches closer to the stray. He looks back at the car then to the dog, letting his tongue loll out in a friendly way. *Come with?*

The dog whines a little, looking unsure. Will takes a chance and nudges his muzzle against him. *Safe, food, pack, friends* .

He gets up, giving himself a shake and starts to trot to the car. He glances back over his shoulder. *Come* . He puts a little alpha authority into the bark.

The dog pads over obediently, and with a little more urging, hops into the car. Will casts off the mental skin and quickly gets redressed. The dog watches him curiously as he gets into the car and heads home.

Winston, he thinks. If the dog had some other name in the past, there wasn't really a way for him to find out. Dogs recognized words, but had no way of conveying the sounds for something as abstract as a human name. They have ways they think of themselves and refer to others, but it had more to do with smell and pack structure. Will's canine name translated to something like, *Pack head; many furs* .

The newly dubbed Winston is fed on the screened in back porch, separate from the other dogs, who are happy as always to see him. They're curious about the new dog smell clinging to his clothes. While it's harder for him to understand them in human form, he is familiar enough with his pack (and dogs in general) to get the gist of what they are saying. They vie for his attention while he fixes his own meal, heating up some leftovers.

Buster *: Food? Please?*

Ellie *: New dog! New Smell!*

Jackson *: Will! Will! Pet! Pet!*

Zoe *: More food?*

Harley *: Play, chase, outside, Will?*

Max *: Will! Protected territory! Hunted! Good Max?*

Will assured Max he was a good dog, pet Jackson, opened the door for Harley, and shooed Zoe and Buster away while he ate. Then he cleaned up his dishes and goes back out to the porch. Winston suffers patiently through a bath and blow dry, and gets willingly into the ‘introduction cage. Will props open the porch door and calls the rest of the pack, undressing and pulling on his preferred canine skin, that of a red wolf.

Winston blinks at him from inside the cage. Will snuffles at him. *New pack.* He tells him.

He turns to the rest of the dogs who have gathered in a rough semicircle facing them. *New friend, joins pack.*

Jackson barks, *Friend? Friend play?* Max lets out a low growl, *smell strange* .

Will growls back at him, giving him a stern eye. *Pack now* . Max backs down, unhappily. Ellie rolls over on her back in the chair, bored with all of them.

Will turns human so he can unlatch the cage and shifts back. Winston steps out and presses against Will’s flank as Jackson and Buster come to give him a good sniff over. Will licks his ear to reassure him. After a few minutes of circling and tail wagging, Jackson has managed to convince Winston to come play and they are romping around the yard with Buster and Zoe at their heels.

Will gives Harley a friendly sniff, laughing at the big dog when he flops over. He noses at Ellie in the chair. *Lazy* , he teases her. She huffs at him and turns around. Then he turns back to Max who is sulking next to the house door.

Will lies down next to him, thumping his tail. Max looks away. He nudges him with his muzzle. Max grumbles at him. Will gets up, and heads out into the yard, nose twitching. He locates what he is looking for, and comes back with Max’s favorite rope toy. He dangles it enticingly in front of Max, whose ears perk up. Will drops it in front of him, and noses it closer. Max sighs, as if it’s a great hassle and takes the rope. Soon, Will has him out in the yard playing with Buster. It’ll probably take a while for him to warm up to Winston, but Will knows he’ll come around.

He does a circle of the property with Harley loping beside him. He howls an *all safe* to the rest of the pack, who answer back with happy enthusiasm. Will can hear Winston tentatively join in. Yes, he’ll get along fine.

Back at the house he shifts to human, opening the door and whistling. The pack comes flooding in. He doesn’t bother putting clothes back on, just dropping the things he was wearing into the hamper. He turns on the heater in the center of the dogs’ beds before going to shower and heading to bed himself.

And he dreams of shadows and antlers and blood.

The name skinwalker is more metaphoric than most realize. The legend goes that people would wear the pelt of whatever animal they wished to become. To some extent this is true, when Will changes his shape, he mentally slips into the skin of whatever animal he is becoming. But his mind is equally affected as his body, the thought processes becoming that of the animal. If he is not careful, he can lose himself in the beast. (Sometimes he wonders if that is what happened to his mother. If she just slipped away into another skin.)

What he keeps to himself, not even daring to discuss it with other skinwalkers, is that he can do the same thing with people. Not take their physical shape, but can put on their mental skin. It’s more difficult, the people’s mind being a tangled, complex mess, but he can do it. Humans and sentient Beings alike. And he has glimpsed the shape of Elise Nichol's killer.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> I'm going to try and update every week. I was aiming for Thursdays, but obviously that didn't happen this week :P

Count Hannibal Lecter, MD: former surgeon, current psychiatrist, inveterate dragon, sat poised in his office dispassionately watching his least favorite patient sob into a tissue. He had taken Franklyn on because he had heard he was something of a challenge, and he was to some extent, but it was more of the white elephant variety.

The dumpy little man leaves the crumpled tissues on the side table. Hannibal eyes them with distaste. Had he been in his true form, his tail would have twitched. This was not his lair, he was not as *particular* about his office as he was his home, but still, the man could at least use the wastebasket. Now he'd have to sanitize the table and the wipes always bothered his sinuses.

He stands, glad that their hour is up. Putting on a reassuring mask, he walks Franklyn to the door. Surprisingly, a stranger waits on the other side. He sends him to the waiting room. Where he should have gone in the first place. Hmph. FBI agents, thinking they could just go wherever they like. There are ways things should be done.

Taking his time making notes on Franklyn's file and storing it away, he finally allows Agent Crawford into the inner office. The man is gratifyingly appreciative of the decor. Of course this isn't his *treasure* . That is secured in his lair and protected by magic, but it is still nice to have his possessions admired. Acquisition and collecting of beautiful and interesting items was a quintessential part of being a dragon, after all.

Still, he is careful, only relaxing minutely when he discovers Alana had directed the agent his way.

"She showed me your paper in The Journal of Beings Psychiatry. Evolutionary Origins of Beings Mythos and Exclusion. Very interesting, even to a layman."

Either Jack has read up on the best way to approach dragons, or he simply wants to butter Hannibal up before he asks him for something. Hannibal is not immune to flattery, but he'd like the man to come to the point. He seems to sense this.

"I'd like you to help me with a psychological profile."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "You have many talented profilers at your disposal, Dr. Bloom included."

“This is something of a special case. It isn’t for a suspect. Have you ever heard of Will Graham?”

Hannibal flashes through his mental portrait gallery, then through the mental wheeladex that he stores the information of less important people. “I don’t believe so.”

“He’s a professor at Quantico. Teaches profiling and Being identification. Very talented detective, and an expert in his field.” Jack hesitates for a moment. “He’s a Being. Skinwalker.”

That’s a surprise. Hannibal tries to stay abreast of the local Beings community. This Will Graham must keep a low profile. His interest grows.

“I see. And you want me to create a psychological profile of him?”

“I want to make sure he is stable enough to go into the field. To have a support, If necessary.”

“I take it he is not fond of psychiatrists?”

Jack gives a laugh that is half rueful sigh. “He is...defensive. But, he’s the best chance we have of cracking this case.”

“It is difficult to help someone who refuses help.” Though not impossible.

“I just need to know if he can handle the job. What effect it’ll have on him.”

Hannibal is intrigued, and it wouldn’t hurt to have a foot in at the FBI in any case. “When would you like me to meet him?”

***

Will Graham arrives in Agent Crawford’s office a few minute after Hannibal, smelling of nervous sweat, bad coffee, cheap aftershave, and an enticing wild scent all but hidden under the malodorous clutter. That seemed to be the professor’s central motif. Hannibal had an eye for hidden depths, and Will Graham is certainly a diamond in the rough. Beneath the scruff and rumpled clothes, he is quite lovely with striking blue eyes and handsome features. If what Jack has to say about him is true, there is an equally captivating mind protected by his prickly demeanor.

He shakes Hannibal’s hand as Jack introduces him as another consultant, glancing at his face without meeting his eyes. Hannibal sees him note the dark fingernails, one of the few tells of his kind in human form. Will’s shoulders seem to hunch in on themselves as if he is trying to make himself seem smaller. Hannibal steps away as Jack goes over the case with him, looking at the pictures of the missing girls, giving the skinwalker some perceived space.

The case is interesting in its own right. The man’s fixation on this girl. Because it is one girl, Hannibal can see that. Probably a daughter judging by the way he so lovingly tucked the Nichols girl into bed. The consumption is the point that grabs him. He knows all about the need for possession. Though he never considered eating someone as a way to keep them with him.

He asks Jack about confessions. He had seen Freddie Lounds' post that morning, that was sure to stir the attention seekers and delusional up. What a strange thing the mind was.

"Tasteless." Will mutters from his seat, the furrow of his brow deepening.

"Do you have trouble with taste?" He asks, walking back over.

"My thoughts are often not tasty."

"Nor mine." Lie, though most other people wouldn't consider them so. "No effective barriers." Another lie. He wonders if he and Will are going to interact enough for the other Being to pick up on his dishonesty. The thought is a stirring one.

"I make forts." Will says flatly, trying to shut him down, but Hannibal is not so easily dissuaded.

"Associations come quickly."

"So do forts." Jack was right, he is very defensive.

Hannibal presses on, eyes carefully watching his face. "I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love."

That startles him enough into looking at him, perhaps a flicker of fear in his eye, and Hannibal feels a curl of satisfaction at provoking the response.

"Whose profile are you working on?" The outrage is clear in his voice. That was quick, but Hannibal didn't think Jack's plan to keep it a secret from Will was a particularly good one. The profiler was too sharp.

"I'm sorry, Will. Observing is what we do. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off."

Will's lip curls, and Hannibal thinks he may be holding himself back from baring his teeth. A learned behavior from so much time around humans. Hannibal wonders if Will ever feels comfortable enough to truly be himself. But then, what is the true self of a shapeshifter? He would have to do some research on them.

"I have a class to teach." Will stands abruptly and strides out of the room.

"Maybe we shouldn't poke him like that doctor, perhaps a less direct approach."

"It is an uncomfortable gift he has, Jack." Hannibal says thoughtfully.

"Shapeshifting?"

"Perception. It is a tool that is pointed on both ends." he suspects that Will is more powerful than he lets on. He was definitely not pleased at Hannibal's assessment. If Hannibal is any

judge, Will Graham's abilities go beyond just turning into animals.

Jack looks pensive. Hannibal directs his attention back toward the case. "This girl-eater you are hunting...I think I can help good Will see his face." The reaction to that face is what Hannibal is anticipating.

***

Hannibal gets the call to travel to Minnesota the afternoon Cassie Boyle's body is discovered. He flies at short notice that evening and finds a suitable hotel with kitchenettes in the room, so he can show up bright and early at Will's motel room bearing breakfast.

The skinwalker glares blearily out of the doorway, smelling of fear tinged sweat and cheap laundry detergent. That wild smell is stronger now, though. Hannibal wonders what he was dreaming about.

Will scowls at him, but lets him in. Hannibal feels an inner thrill of elation at the acquiescence that he will have to examine later. He sits across from Will, presenting him with the protein scramble. He smiles at wringing a complement out of the teacher. He doubts Will gives many of those out.

"I would apologize for my analytical ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you'll tire of that eventually so I have to consider using apologies sparingly."

A wary blue eye glances up from his plate, though Hannibal notices it doesn't get above his cheek.

"Just keep it professional."

"Or we could socialize like adults, god forbid we become friendly."

"I don't find you that interesting."

Well, that's a challenge if Hannibal ever heard one. "You will."

They eat in silence for a moment. "Agent Crawford tells me you have a knack for the monsters."

Will's frown grows even more pronounced. "Did he really phrase it like that?"

"Not in so many words, but I took his meaning."

"He better watch out, talk like that can get him accused of speciesism. Not that it matters much in the FBI." His voice is so sour Hannibal can practically taste it.

"Two steps forward and one step back. Such is the way of progress."

"I suppose I should be glad no one has tried to burn me at the stake."

“That isn’t to say there aren’t true monsters. Those creatures Being and human alike that prey on the innocent.”

Will sits back, Hannibal watches his mind switch tracks. “I don’t think the Shrike killed that girl in the field.”

He sounds so definite, Hannibal pushes him for more.

“It’s like he had to show me a negative so I could see the positive.”

Oh, what a clever boy. Hannibal is practically purring inside. He distracts him from that line of thinking. “The mathematics of behavior. All those ugly variables. Some bad math with this shrike fellow. Are you reconstructing his fantasies? What kind of problems does he have?”

Will gives him the eye, on guard now. “He has a few.”

Hannibal smiles at him beatifically. “Ever have any problems, Will?”

The eyes narrow. “No.”

Hannibal’s smile widens, just a hint of sharp teeth flashing. “Of course you don’t. You and I are just alike. Problem free. Nothing about us to feel horrible about.”

Will’s eyebrows raise. “Never thought I’d hear one of your type compared to me.”

It was the first time he’d alluded to Hannibal’s species.

“We are not so prideful as the stories would have you believe.”

Will doesn’t answer, picking his fork back up.

“Have you met many dragons?” It wasn’t that dragons were scarce by Beings standards, but they were not quite so public as, say, fairies. Dragons enjoyed privacy.

“Not that I know of.”

No, Hannibal supposed he hadn’t. He couldn’t imagine any dragon that met Will would have been able to resist collecting him.

The thing about dragons is...Well, dragons are not human. A fairly obvious statement, but therein lies the main issue that most humans have with Beings. They are expected to act like humans instead of what they are.

The way a dragon thinks is distinct, in may ways they are actually simple creatures. If they see something they want, they take it and keep it forever. A human hears this and it sounds like a greedy, possessive monster hoarding valuables away. What they miss is that a dragon would never mistreat a treasure. Because it is theirs, they take care of it. The lengths a dragon will go to in order to acquire and protect their possessions is unique among sentient creatures. Never try to come between a dragon and their treasure.

“I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little tea-cup, the finest china used for only special guests.”

Will chuckles at that, and Hannibal feels that instinctual pull telling him to snatch this jewel up before someone else does.

“How do you see me?”

As a pearl before swine . He thinks, but out loud he says, “The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.” Which is true in its own way, Will is a man of many faces.

“Never been a mongoose before, but I guess I could give it a shot.” His shoulders relax some, and Hannibal celebrates the small victory.
But it wouldn’t do to show it this early, “Finish your breakfast.” *The first of many we’ll have together.* He silently promises.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the Hobb's case, and Will and Hannibal have a session.

Chapter Notes

This is what I get for trying to give myself deadlines. I'll try to have chapter 4 up next week.

Afterwards, Will could only remember the events in flashes. Mrs. Hobbs falling, light glinting off the knife, the smell of gunpowder, and a deep, dark satisfaction that rolled up through him as Hobbs slumped back against the cabinets. Then he was outside, staring at a too bright world through the blood splatter on his glasses.

Then the background faded into a blur and Hannibal came into focus. He spoke to the paramedics loading an ashen Abigail Hobbs into the back of an ambulance, then came over to Will. He says something, but the skinwalker can't hear it over the ringing in his ears.

His eyes fix on Hannibal's lips, their moving and after a moment, he realizes the dragon is saying his name. He shakes his head slowly, closing his eyes to block out the world. In some corner of his brain, he knows he is in shock, but a greater part of his brain wants to flee from being himself. He can feel the lure of the wild calling him, the need to throw on a skin and escape the complexities of the human world.

A warm hand on the back of his neck jolts his eyes open. Hannibal's face is close to his, so near that Will can smell him even with his currently limited senses. He smells like smoke and spices, and something ever so slightly metallic.

"Will," he can hear the deep baritone now. He meets the dragon's red tinted eyes. "Listen to my voice. It is 11:34 am, you are in Bloomington, Minnesota."

Will sucks in a shaking breath, feeling lightheaded. "Yes." His voice seems to echo in his head.

"Agent Crawford is going to meet us at the local police station. Are you all right to go?"

Will began to gather himself, professionalism rushing back in. "Yes." He looks down at his hands, which are clenched tight. Consciously relaxing them, he sees that there is blood

splatter mixed in with the gunpowder residue.

“Maybe you should drive.”

***

Will left the state of Minnesota with the lingering paranoia that he was going to be called back at any moment. Fortunately that does not happen and he breathes a sigh of relief when he touches down in Virginia. The pack are beside themselves with joy to see him. It had been awhile since he had to leave them alone for more than a day. Winston comes and presses himself against his legs.

As soon as he tosses his carry on bag on the bed to be unpacked later, he strips and shifts into his red wolf form. The dogs swarm around him, even Ellie who isn’t overly demonstrative. After a jolly romp around the property, he collapses in a pile with them in the house, lazily nosing the heater on without changing. Usually he didn’t like to sleep in animal form, but he needed a significant break from being human.

A break which didn’t last nearly long enough since he had to get back to his actual job the next day. The abrupt cut off of talking then the increase in whispers during the lecture grated on his nerves. Obviously news of him killing Hobbs had got around the Academy. He wondered how many of those rumours had him actually using a gun instead of ripping the man’s throat out or whatever they thought Beings did. Never mind the fact that Hobbs had been the one eating people.

He finished up the lesson about kelpies in record time and turned them loose just to turn around and see Alana coming up the aisle. He tries for a smile.

“Hi.” She has some fae in her family history. Not enough to give her wings, but enough that she has a very slight glimmer around her. He likes her, he does, but he can’t help resent her oh so careful treatment of him.

Like now. “How are you, Will?”

“I...have no idea.” Well, to be fair, he has been avoiding thinking as much as possible.

“That may change. I didn't want you to be ambushed --”

“Is this an ambush?” Behind her, he can see Jack parting the sea of trainees like a particularly dogged prophet.

“Ambush is later. Immediately later, soon to now. When Jack arrives consider yourself ambushed.”

“Here’s Jack now. Thanks for the warning.”

“How was class?”

Oh, were they doing small talk now? “Fine.”

“Good, good.” Apparently that filled the politeness quota, and he came to the point. “I’ve heard from the review board. They’ve okayed active return to the field.”

Huh. That was...something. Will wavered somewhere between pleased and apprehensive.

“Question is... do you want to go back in the field.” Alana asks. Which was annoying despite the fact that he was wondering that himself.

“I want you to go back in the field, but I told the Board I'm recommending a psych evaluation.”

Anger swamped his other burgeoning emotions. His face turns stony. “Are we starting now?” He asks Alana.

“Oh, I’m not doing it.” He is pretty sure he doesn’t imagine the slight hint of regret in her expression.

“Hannibal Lecter might be a better fit. But if you'd be more comfortable with Dr. Bloom--”

“I'm not going to be comfortable with anybody inside my head.” Better fit, huh? Yeah, shove the two full Beings together.

“You've never killed someone before, Will. It's a deadly force encounter. It's a lot to digest.” Alana’s big, brown eyes were full of concern. It made him want to growl.

“I used to work homicide. I’ve got a good metabolism.”

“Reason you currently *used to* work homicide is you couldn't stomach pulling the trigger. You just pulled the trigger ten times.”

Will’s jaw set, biting back the words that want to spill out. *No,* he wants to say. *The reason I don’t work homicide anymore is because I got stabbed and unconsciously shifted into a bear and scared both the other officers so bad no one wanted me around. Never mind I didn’t even touch anyone. Not even the suspect who stabbed me.*

Hold the phone. “So Psych Eval's not a formality?”

“It's so I can sleep. I asked you to get close to Hobbs and I need to know you didn’t get too close.”

Will can feel his heart rate kick up. “You asked me if I thought he might be a Being. He wasn’t.”

“Can you tell me that you weren’t affected at all?”

That’s a trick question if he ever heard one. “Therapy doesn't work on me.”

“Cause you won't let it."

“Cause I know all the tricks.”

“Un-learn some tricks.” They were both bristling now. Alana steps in.

“Why not have a conversation with Hannibal? He was there. He knows what you went through.”

“I need my beauty sleep, Will.”

Will closes his eyes, sighing through his nose. “Fine. One conversation.”

***

Hannibal’s office was so stereotypically draconic that Will half expected to see a mound of gold sitting around somewhere. What must his actual lair look like? He wonders as he seeks high ground on the balcony, ostensibly to look at the books.

He can feel the eyes of the man-shaped Being below him. He holds a piece of paper in his hand expectantly.

“What’s that?”

“Your Psychological Evaluation. You're totally functional and more or less sane.” The dragon smiles, “Well done.”

“Did you just rubber stamp me?”

“Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork.”

“Jack thinks I need therapy.” He presses, like one prods a sore tooth.

“I'm not sure therapy will work on you.” Hannibal tilts his head. “Stealing into other minds has taught you how to fortify your own.”

Will grips the railing of the banister so tight his knuckles turn white. “I don’t steal.”

‘Poor choice of words.” Hannibal said smoothly. “Emulate perhaps?”

“How’d you figure it out?”

Hannibal doesn’t do him the disservice of pretending not to know what he means. “You are not the only one who has made a study of the history of Being’s, Will. I found Dr. Wauneka’s work on Beings of the Navajo Nation to be particularly enlightening.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that one.”

“It was unfortunately not widespread due to her status as a woman and person of color during the time it was published. I believe I have a copy of it if you would like to borrow it.”

Will narrowed his eyes at the doctor. “Lending out your possessions?”

“I am a *draco novum* , Will. I do not hoard every item that I come across. In fact, I’m rather selective about my treasures.”

“Only the best?”

“Eye of the beholder, but I value them highly. What do you value, Will?”

Will doesn’t answer, but descends the ladder to prowl around the office, not looking at Hannibal, who stays standing before his desk and turning to watch Will’s meandering. He stops in front of a brass statue of a proud buck.

“I value my dogs, my home.”

“Things that you have made your own. We all have our treasures.”

“I have been accused of being a dog hoarder before.”

Hannibal walks toward him, stopping a respectful distance away. “I have always disliked the term ‘hoard’, it devalues the items. I prefer ‘collection’ or ‘trove’.”

“I use ‘pack’.” A flash of a grin passes over Will’s face. Hannibal returns it.

“Well, there are different standards for living treasures.” The doctor concedes.

For the first time, Will purposely looks into Hannibal’s eyes. They are a rust color that one never finds in humans and have a reflective sheen like a cat’s. They consider each other in silence for a drawn out moment. Something in Will that he tended to keep locked up tight behind a door in the back of his mind creaked open.

“Is it difficult?” He asks, before his brain catches up with his mouth.

Hannibal tilts his head in inquiry.

Will’s jaw worked. It was probably rude to ask, but since he’d already started...“Having to hide your true self from people all the time.”

A smile spread slowly across Hannibal’s face, but it wasn’t the polite one he’d worn previously. No, this one was full of teeth. And there seemed to be more of them and were a great deal sharper than a human’s.

“Dear Will,” That accented voice seems deeper, reverberating with a low growl, “I could ask you the same thing.”

Will’s eyes skittered away. He tried to reach for a denial, but couldn’t find one that felt honest. “It’s not the same.” He mutters.

“Isn’t it?” Hannibal asks. It felt like he was closer now despite the fact neither of them had moved, as if Hannibal was taking up more room than he had been.

“This is my real body, not a...projection.”

“Projection implies a physical distance. I assure you that I am very present in my current form. A colleague of mine refers to it as my ‘person suit’.

“To slip on in polite company?”

“Indeed. Of course it is also simpler to navigate around in. Modern society is not designed for an 800lb flying reptile.”

Will blinks. “No. I guess not. You can fly?”

Hannibal turns and walks over to the chairs, Will trailing behind him. “I am one of the few lines that retain the ability. Most wingspans have shrunk to be functionally useless. Though it is not something I indulge in often. As stated, the city is not an ideal place to do so, and I find it is usually more effort than it’s worth to find the time and a suitably secluded area to stretch my wings.”

“Yes, I can see how that would be a pain. It’s a shame though, flying is…” Will’s eyes go unfocused.

Hannibal sits and smiles at him. “Do you fly often?”

“Not very often, but every few months. I tend toward raptors, they have the best eyesight.”

“Why not more frequently?”

Will rubs his hands on his pants, focusing on the sensation of the weave on his skin instead of on the doctor. “It’s too tempting sometimes to just...keep going. To keep flying.”

“To lose yourself.” Hannibal says.

Will nods.

“I think what you need more than therapy, is a way out of dark places when you get lost.”

“And you’ll be my guiding light?” Will asks skeptically.

“I’ll be whatever you need me to be. Will, the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself and not the worst of someone else.”

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